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ABSTRACT

The large scale movements of refugees in many areas of the world are having dramatic impacts on indigenous cultures, languages, and literacies. Both anecdotal evidence and research suggest that the experience of uprooting and displacement creates an increased demand for literacy, new forms of literate expression, and more multilingual environments. A discussion of these issues (1) examines the international context of and legal protection for refugees and displaced persons; (2) outlines the research on language and literacy; (3) looks at stages in the experience of uprooting and displacement and provides anecdotal evidence, based on interviews with relief officials, workers, and refugees; and (4) concludes with a conceptual model to predict language and literacy changes. Analysis of these issues in light of current population movement patterns suggests that the retention of languages and literacies depends on the understanding of present and future uses. It is suggested that while refugee emergency situations initially decrease literacy levels, the process of dislocation may create greater demand for education and multiple literacies. Although educational rights are protected by international law, the real situation is more complex. Local governments and communities and international organizations must be involved in policy-making and advocacy. Additional research is recommended. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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LANGUAGE AND LITERACY
SHIFTS IN REFUGEE POPULATIONS

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There are over 14 million officially counted refugees in the world. This population is equivalent to the population of 42 of the least populated countries in the world (approximately one quarter of the voting bloc in the United Nations). The large majority are children and live in developing countries (see Figure 1). Some are homeless, others have lived in refugee camps or settlements their entire lives. A much larger 20-30 million displaced peoples — internal refugees, economic migrants, asylum seekers — are not considered refugees. Yet, their lives have also been disrupted by war, famine, and/or internal civil strife.

These large scale population movements are having dramatic impacts on indigenous cultures, languages, and literacies. From the perspective of national governments, refugees and displaced people put severe strains on their resources and capacity to provide social services. In national efforts to provide universal education, these peoples often number among the residual, hard-to-reach populations. Refugees and displaced persons have also been ignored in development efforts even when their plight becomes a long term way of life. Treating these situations in relief rather than development terms has resulted in missed opportunities for improving the education and long term welfare of these growing populations.

As this paper will demonstrate, both anecdotal evidence and the research suggest that the experience of uprooting and displacement creates an increased demand for literacy, new forms of literate expression, and more multilingual environments. The first section of this paper discusses the international context and legal protections for refugees and displaced persons. The second outlines the research on language and literacy. The third looks at stages of the experience of uprooting and displacement and provides anecdotal evidence (based on interviews with relief officials, workers, and refugees). The paper concludes with a conceptual model to predict language and literacy shifts.

International Context

International instruments protecting the rights of refugees and displaced persons make little reference to language and literacy rights, although these rights are often intrinsically related to the preservation of cultural identities. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child refer to the basic right to education. In practice, this right is largely interpreted as the right to receive formal or nonformal basic literacy and numeracy training, but should equally protect informal modes of acquisition which are essential to a group's ethnic and linguistic survival. The 1951 Convention accords refugee status to those with a

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Nationality has been interpreted to include "ethnic or linguistic group". Implementation guidelines for the 1951 Convention also address the issue of literacy. The UNHCR Emergency and Social Service Handbooks recommend that native language literacy classes be established during the emergency, and care and maintenance phases of a relief operation. Recognizing that native language literacy instruction may conflict with local programs of instruction, the Social Service Handbook advises:

> Where the language of refugees is different from that of the country of asylum, native language literacy classes can supplement the local primary school curriculum.

Although the guidelines are progressive, implementation is often more problematic and the underlying political issues complex. The primary decision-makers are the refugees or displaced persons. Their decisions, however, are mediated by the international relief organizations and national governments, who control access to resources and determine the degree of interaction with the local community. The first group's decisions about informal and formal modes of acquisition are usually be governed by their perceptions of their present and future cultural and economic survival. Research in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand, for example, showed that the different generations' decisions about language and literacy corresponded to their decisions about the future -- repatriation to Laos, long-term camp life, or third country resettlement.

The international community recognizes three durable solutions for refugee situations (which may also apply to displaced persons). In order of preference, they are: (1) voluntary repatriation, (2) local integration, and (3) third country resettlement. The fourth, unrecognized, but often long term solution for many refugees and displaced persons is refugee camp or settlement life (the way of life may be long term, but not necessarily the physical location). Although the majority of Southeast Asian refugees (1.6 of a total two million) have been resettled in the U.S. and other Western countries, four-fifths of the refugees and displaced persons in Eastern and Southern Africa and over three million Afghans in Pakistan are living in temporary settlements.

Language and Literacy Research

Despite the fact that the majority of the world's refugees and displaced persons are likely to remain for many years in settlement situations and that voluntary repatriation or local integration are preferred durable solutions, most of the language and literacy research to date has focused on third country resettlement and second language acquisition, specifically the acquisition of English. The research focus in many ways reflects donor funding priorities and the fact that the majority of the research has been on Southeast Asians who have resettled in the U.S. and Canada.

Certain lessons, however, may be derived from this literature about: (1) the language acquisition of rural, often preliterate peoples displaced to more urbanized, highly literate settings and (2) second and third language acquisition of an international language by pre- and semi-literate peoples. A major U.S.-federally funded research study, for example, found that proficiency in native language literacy, age (younger versus older), and prior education are significant factors in second language acquisition. The same researchers observed that the acquisition of native language literacy may indicate an openness to new forms of knowledge and change, rather than simply an interest in preserving an ethnic identity. Several researchers also found that patterns of English literacy and language acquisition vary by generation (or age group) and that refugees often depend on their more literate children to act as language and cultural mediators in the new setting. An evaluation funded by the U.S. State Department documented the positive impacts of formal English language training in the refugee camps, which suggests that even short term, formal educational programs may be effective. However, subsequent research in the Philippines Refugee Processing Center showed that in a highly politicized setting, such as the refugee camp, the educational value of such programs can be diluted by the larger ideological and political objectives of their organizers.

Emergency Phase

Although research on language and literacy is lacking for the majority of refugee situations, the major issues can be outlined through an analysis of the stages of displacement combined with some anecdotal evidence. In the initial flight and emergency stage, formal and sometimes even informal modes of acquisition cease. In their flight, refugees and displaced persons often seek asylum with those of similar ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Since ethnic boundaries in much of Africa and parts of Asia transcend national ones, this strategy often insures greater initial receptivity (although it does not lessen the economic impacts on the host country). When the language of the asylum group differs, the refugees and displaced persons will initially communicate through translators. In this stage, many refugees or displaced persons hope to return to their homelands and villages and have little investment in learning the second language.

The initial stage of an emergency is often the most highly publicized period. Relief organizations, if they are present, are primarily concerned with providing basic necessities — food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. The encounter, however, between the refugee or displaced persons and the relief organizations may already affect language and literacy use. Relief organizations usually conduct their work primarily in English or French, which necessitates identifying translators and interpreters. Often they chose young men, who are more visible and/or willing or able to learn their language. This process if continued over a long period can upset traditional political power structures by associating language use with access to resources and decision-making. A highly visible emergency, such as the "Cambodian Crisis" or the "Ethiopian Famine", may also foster new literary forms of expression. Rural peasants are exposed to the Western press and may learn to use it to their advantage. The tellers may incorporate such events within their own literary traditions. However, the press and relief officials, who must

translate these events to their own people, encourage autobiographies and stories of escapes and atrocities (whose forms of organization may be alien to the tellers).

Care and Maintenance Phase

During the second phase — the care and maintenance stage — shifts in language and literacy patterns depend primarily on the relationships that refugees or displaced persons establish with the local population and relief organizations, and their expectations of their future. Whether the camp or settlement is open or closed affects the degree of interaction with the local community. Although closed camps, such as Site 2, a Cambodian camp in Thailand, limit such interactions, relationships with Thai relief workers inside the camp and trading still resulted in many Cambodian refugees learning to communicate in Thai. In the more open camps or settlements, where there is a great deal of economic and social interaction, there are even more incentives to learn the asylum language (and occasionally, for local residents who trade with the camp or settlement, to learn the refugees' or displaced persons' languages).

Decisions about formal schooling and its relationship to that of the asylum country will have a major impact on patterns of language and literacy use. If the refugees or displaced persons have access to the local schools, they have more incentive to learn the asylum language. A parallel school structure may also be established. With the Mozambican refugees in Zimbabwe and Malawi, for example, there has been a conscious decision to maintain the national Mozambican curriculum taught in Portuguese with the assumption that the Mozambicans will eventually repatriate. Language policies, however, may sometimes be at variance with larger political goals. Although the Thai Government clearly stated that they would not permit local resettlement and expected the Hmong refugees to repatriate or resettle, Thai became the preferred language of primary schools in Ban Vinai refugee camp. The seeming contradiction reflected the Thai Government's concern with maintaining a comparable system to that of the local population's by bringing the camp primary schools under the authority of the Ministry of Education. When displaced persons or refugees integrate into local school systems, such as the Sudanese in Khartoum or the Afghans in Pakistan, they may severely strain the resources and capacities of these systems. Alternatively, the refugees themselves may establish their own separate formal school systems, such as the Qu'ranic schools of Moslem refugees in sub-Saharan Africa. However, when refugee groups receive (or at least, appear to receive) more educational funding and services, this can become a source of resentment with local populations.

During the care and maintenance phase, interactions with the relief community will also impact patterns of language and literacy. These interactions usually involve a minority of the population — those who are employed by such organizations and/or participate in their language training. Such classes are more likely to attract young men given traditional expectations of women's productive and reproductive roles in many cultures. As data from Thailand demonstrate, gender differences in language use developed between Hmong men, who learned English or French, and Hmong women who continue to function primarily in Hmong, Lao, and Thai. When relief organizations encourage female participation in such

programs, they may be reversing traditional cultural roles and expectations (e.g., offering English classes to nonliterate Afghan women). Such interventions may ultimately have implications for a group's capacity to reintegrate into their former environment.

Over a period of time, camps and settlements may also develop into multilingual environments. The camps in the Philippines and Thailand had relief workers from several different countries. Young, highly motivated refugees took advantage of the opportunity to study English, Japanese, Chinese, and French. Since the classes were usually only a few hours a week and many of the participants lacked extensive experience with formal schooling, the degree of acquisition was often quite limited.

Interactions with relief workers may also initiate new literary technologies and innovations. In Ban Vinai, a Japanese relief agency taught formerly preliterate Hmong how to operate a printing press and they encouraged the publication of books in several languages. The Hmong began publishing traditional stories and myths which had previously been transmitted orally. Refugee groups dispersed over long distances have also adopted new forms of communication (e.g., telephone, postal systems, tape recorders, and video) to maintain kinship ties and ethnic identities.

Although refugees or displaced persons may initially look to relief organizations and host governments for assistance, the uneven power relationship may engender forms of resistance. The Mien, a Laotian minority in the Thai camps, developed their own Romanized alphabet in part to establish their own literate tradition in face of the new "foreign" literacies they encountered. A Hmong writing system invented by a young nonliterate Hmong messianic leader also enjoyed a brief revival with the establishment of a Hmong temple in two Thai camps. According to one scholar, the Hmong may have adopted this new religion and language to resist the missionizing influences of the Christian relief agencies. The assertion of ethnic identities and indigenous literacies may become means to counter the dependency relationships fostered by long term camp life. The establishment of Qu'ranic schools and teaching of Arabic in refugee settlements in Sub-saharan Africa or the establishment of native language literacy classes by Salvadorean refugees in Honduras may be seen as expressions of self-sufficiency and autonomy.

Long Term Phase

In the long term settlement or refugee camp stage -- the stage in which many of the world's refugees and displaced persons now find themselves -- language and literacy shifts become more profound and embedded. Generational differences develop between the older generation who speak the first language, while the young frequently use the asylum language. Without a definite future, the young may also see education and multilingualism -- particularly proficiency in a language of international currency -- as key to their future economic survival. The new languages and literacies begin to take hold. The experience of living in an urban, often institutionalized and bureaucratized environment is having significant impacts on many refugees from rural areas throughout the world. When the younger generations have spent most or all of their lives in camps or settlements, it becomes exceedingly difficult for them to return to the life of a rural camel herder or swidden rice farmer.

Refugees and displaced persons — even those in closed settlements — become increasingly integrated into the local culture and language as that environment represents social and economic opportunities. The Angolans in the Shaba Province of Zaire, for example, initially maintained the Portuguese curriculum with the expectation of eventually repatriating. However, since the refugee schools did not extend past the primary level, Angolan children began learning French to qualify for places in the Zaire secondary schools. Urbanized and educated students in long term refugee camp situations — such as former Ugandan refugees in Sudan or many Ethiopian refugees in Djibouti and Somalia — see secondary and higher education as essential for their future livelihood, wherever that might be. Without other means of productive employment, the value of education often increases. Learning French, English, or Arabic also creates the opportunity for refugees to earn a UNHCR or other international scholarship to study in other countries.

Long term camp or settlement life may also have gender impacts. Girls' access to education usually increases (e.g., the Hmong in Ban Vinai or the Afghan in Pakistan) and girls as well as boys may become literate in one or more languages. Although the refugee experience creates new opportunities and social roles, such experiences also disrupt traditional relationships. The new languages and literacies — and the school itself — may symbolize these new roles and parents may resist the socialization of their children. Gender differences often persist in attendance and retention rates because of external economic and political pressures. Salvadorean refugees in Honduras reportedly hide their older sons at home to keep them from being conscripted. A large majority of Hmong girls in the Thai camps leave school after the second year because households need their daughters' labor for handicraft work, the main camp industry. Girls in many conflict situations are also sexually at risk and may not attend school or drop out sooner for fear of harassment.

Conceptual Model of Language and Literacy Shifts

Whether new languages and literacies are adopted and retained depends on how they are ultimately employed. Different durable (and nondurable) solutions can be outlined in order to make some predictions. A conceptual model of language and literacy outcomes includes three factors: (1) perceived durable solution — where the refugees or displaced persons perceive they will settle, (2) native language literacy, and (3) available resources — which may be determined by the national governments and/or international organizations. The strength of the first factor, perceived durable solution, will be affected by length of time. The second factor, degree of literacy, is a proxy for other social characteristics (since literacy is often correlated with gender, urban/rural, education, and age). Both external agencies (national governments, voluntary relief organizations, and international organizations) and the refugees' or displaced persons' former life experiences influence all three factors (as shown in Figure 2).

Table 1 predicts language and literacy shifts in refugee or displaced persons' populations. In this Table, the refugees or displaced persons are assumed to have access to all necessary resources.

Table 1: Conceptual Framework
Of Language and Literacy Acquisition

Indigenous Charact.	Perceived Durable Solutions			
	Repatriation	Local Int.	Resettlement	Long-Term
Literate	L1+/L2	L1+/L2+	L1+/L2/L3+	L1+/L2+/ L3+
Nonliterate	L1+/L2	L1+/L2+	L1+/L2/L3+	L1+/L2+/ L3

L1 - First Language
L2 - Asylum Language
L3 - International Language
\+ - Literate
No constraints on resources

These predictions assume that prior to the experience of displacement, only the first language was spoken by the majority of the population and that the majority of the literates were literate only in their first language. The predictions also assume that native language literacy programs are offered (which is not always the case). Without such programs, nonliterates are likely to become literate in their first language only if they repatriate. The underlying premise is that the experience of displacement will increase the demand for literacy and multiple language use.

As Table 2 suggests, there are a variety of refugee and displaced persons' situations throughout the world. Literacy characteristics within refugee groups also vary widely. Some refugees and displaced persons are highly literate, others are pre- or nonliterate.

Table 2: Refugee Situations
With Reference to Literacy

Indigenous Charact.	Actual Durable Solutions			
	Repatriation	Local Int.	Resettlement	Long-Term
Literate	Rumanians (Hungary)	Ugandans (Sudan)	1st Wave Vietnamese (U.S.)	Palestinians (W. Bank)
Nonliterate	Rural Rwandans (Zambia)	Afghan Women (Pakistan)	Rural Hmong (U.S.)	Displaced Rural Sudanese

Table 3 provides some preliminary anecdotal evidence of the outcomes of different Southeast Asian refugee groups:

Table 3: Southeast Asian Outcomes

Indigenous Charact.	Actual Durable Solutions			
	Repatriation	Local Int.	Resettlement	Long-Term
Literate	(No Data)	Lao	Vietnamese	Hmong
Acquisition		Thai+	Thai English+	Hm/Lao+ English+ Other
Nonliterate	Lao	Lao	Khmer	Hmong
Acquisition	(No Data)	Lao Thai+	Khmer+ Thai English+	Hmong Thai/Lao+ English

The anecdotal evidence suggests that some of the predicted shifts have occurred (or are occurring among Southeast Asian refugee groups. Further investigation, however, is needed to determine to what extent these shifts have occurred and levels of acquisition. In the Southeast Asian situation, native language literacy is less than predicted. Although native language literacy classes are offered, in most cases, they were not demanded or organized by the refugees themselves. Resettled refugees in the U.S., however, are beginning to organize such classes and native language literacy in this group may increase.

Conclusions

As this analysis suggests, which languages and literacies are adopted and retained depend on conceptions of present and future uses. Although refugee emergency situations initially decrease literacy levels, in the long run, the process of uprooting and dislocation may create a greater demand for education and multiple literacies and languages. Although refugees' and displaced persons' educational rights are protected in international law and convention, the literacy and language issues are often complex. What is in the best interest of both refugees or displaced persons and host governments or communities is not simple or obvious. Local governments and communities need to be involved in the decision making process, because such decisions will ultimately impact local populations. At the same time, international organizations need to play an advocacy role in helping refugees and displaced persons to maintain their native languages and literacies and in helping them to create educational opportunities that will serve them wherever they go.

More research on language and literacy acquisition of refugees and displaced persons is needed. Such research will allow participants, host governments, and international organizations, to consider the longer term educational needs of refugees' and displaced persons' in ways that also benefit local populations. To date much of our knowledge has been based on anecdotal evidence or research about a few refugee groups. The proposed framework offers a way of organizing future research efforts and a growing body of first hand reports to guide policy makers in their decisions.

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James Tollefson, University of Washington, Seattle, September 1989.

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Figure 1: Worldwide Refugee Populations
Source: World Refugee Survey 1988

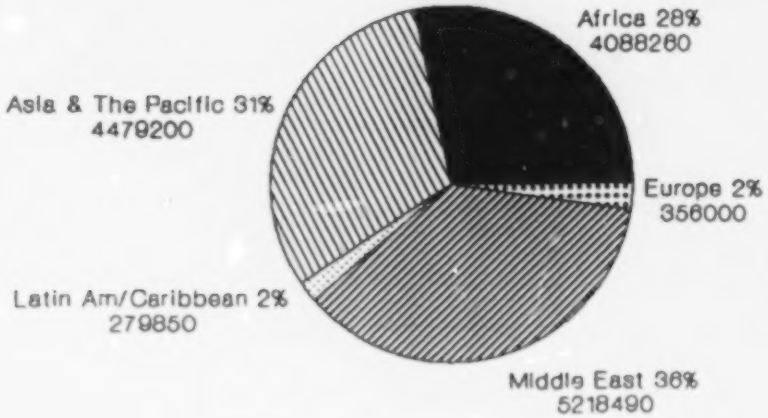

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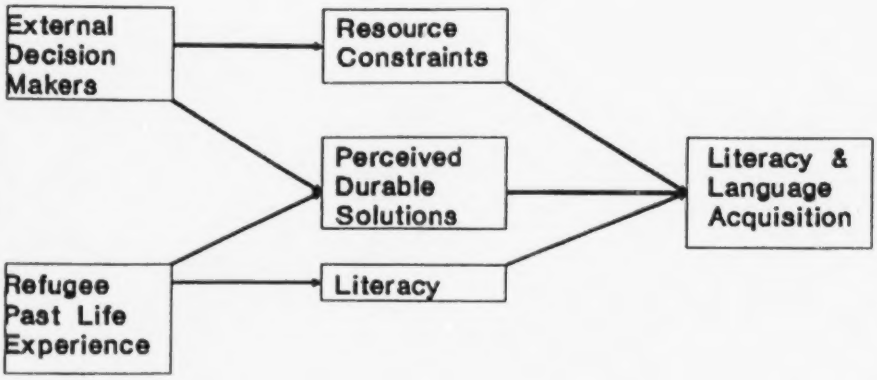
Figure 2: Conceptual Model
of Literacy and Language Acquisition



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